

April 23, 2002

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Only four issues in this overly complex petition are reviewed:

- Joseph Speroni, AH0A

1. Automatic Upgrading of Advanced and Novice Licensees

The ARRL's petition, assigned RM-10867 by the FCC, requests that the number of amateur licenses be reduced from six to three. Actually there are only three currently active license classes – Amateur Extra, General, and Technician. It is true that, as of March 2004 there are still 80,966 Advanced and 32,337 Novice Class licensees, but at the time of restructuring in April 2000, there were 102,725 and 50,007, respectively. These numbers continue to fall. (See Chart I).

There is no clear reason or apparent benefit to the amateur service to changing these records in the ULS database; only possibly increases in Commission costs.

Under the ARRL plan Advanced Class licensees would receive additional *unearned* privileges - 25 kHz on 80, 20, and 15 meter phone, and the lower 25 kHz CW on 80, 40, 20 and 15 meters. While some Advanced Class licensees would perhaps enjoy these privileges, some have commented that they prefer the "status" of an Advanced Class license. Others feel unearned upgrades are unjustified. The Commission should give serious consideration such comments¹.

Commenter is familiar with actions taken by other country's radio authorities and can find none that, as result of lowering or removing Morse requirements, have taken the unusual step of "forced upgrading" of their license databases. This action can and has been simply done by changing, when justified, the privileges of existing licensees. Nothing in the ARRL petition, that basically seeks to create lower entry requirements, justifies costs of modifying the ULS database.

Given time all Advanced and Novice licenses will either upgrade or expire. There is nothing in the ARRL petition impeded by the existence of these ULS database records. Furthermore the ARRL provides no evidence that giving these licensees greater privileges will improve the amateur radio service. Commenter asks the Commission reject the ARRL's requests to (1) change the status of Advanced and Novice licensees in the ULS database and (2) to change their privileges in Part §97.301.

¹ Here are a few comments selected from ECFS on RM-10867

WO9LF – "Regarding merging all Technicians into General, and all Advanced into Extra, I am not in favor if it. I hold an Advanced Class license, and I do not want to be an Extra. If I want to be an Extra, I will go out and take the test, and I am sure that some Technician operators feel the same."

W3BE – "This commenter takes issue with the petition's plan that would have the Commission upgrade our 84,563 Advanced Class operators to Amateur Extra Class without proving to our amateur service community that they are qualified to hold this -- our most prestigious class of operator license. To adopt this proposal would be highly unfair to our most dedicated and most highly qualified 107,313 Amateur Extra Class operators who have expended the time and effort to master the necessary qualifications. By climbing to the top, step-by-step, they have demonstrated their unqualified support for the objectives of our amateur service in our United States. Our Advanced Class operators -- for whatever reasons, have stopped short of the top rung of our ladder. To implement any such plan would diminish the reputation for excellence associated with our expert class. It would incur the disapproval of the very amateur operators who have so faithfully passed all of our examinations. It would, therefore, be detrimental to the future well being of our amateur service and for maintaining harmony and goodwill within our amateur service community. This commenter, therefore, asks respectfully for the Commission to dismiss this aspect of the proposal."

W4LGH – "I am firmly against the proposals sent in by the ARRL and NCVEC. As I do not believe in GRANDFATHERING anyone into a higher class without taking any additional written tests. I feel that both proposals are just giving Ham radio licenses away, and WILL NOT help ham radio in the long run, but WILL further it along the same lines that CB radio fell into. I have no issues with doing away with CW as a requirement, but feel that written exams should be taken and required to hold a valid license for the class they will hold. PLEASE do NOT just GIVE these license away."

WY3D – "I totally oppose however any grandfathering to a higher license class under any conditions. It would be an insult to those of use who have worked hard earning our class of license. Grandfathering would do nothing to bring new people into the hobby. "

2. Need for Growth in Amateur Radio Service

The ARRL provides no data or evidence that the Amateur Radio Service needs restructuring in order to grow. Actual licensing statistics document that the service has been increasing steadily since restructuring in April 2000. What are the expectations of the ARRL with respect to growth? How much relaxation of standards is required to meet what numeric targets? These are questions the ARRL petition should have addressed!

Other countries, also driven by concerns for manufactures' revenue, have attempted to relax regulations in order to drive numbers. Japan is a good example where the amateur radio industry and government have cooperated to successfully increase the number of amateurs. This activity culminated in 1995 when Japan had 1,364,316 licensed amateur radio stations. This proved to be a "bubble" caused by excessive marketing to individuals who had little interest in the radio art (See Chart III). As of December 2003, the number had decreased 674,016 and the United States has now become the country with the largest number of licensed amateurs.

The current U.S. population of amateurs is around 682,000 and contains a number of "inactive" stations. The number of new licensees has grown since August 1999, and continues to grow (see Chart II). There does not appear to be a problem with growth in numbers. The numbers may not match the growth of expenditures of the ARRL or the NCVEC related publication industry's expectations. But restructuring for the sake of these organizations income will not benefit the amateur radio service in the long run. In fact it can cause great damage by creating a large number of drop-outs who were easily licensed and no longer have interest or respect for the service. The Commission has a responsibility to insure a healthy amateur radio service justifying spectrum allocations it receives. Rule changes for the sake of income of a few organizations may not be in the best interests of the amateur radio service.

Restructuring proposals are separate issues from changes desired because of the WARC-3 S-25 Morse requirement change. The Commission should allow the amateur radio community time to address the issue of a new entry level license, rather than combine the two. ARRL and NCVEC proposals dealing with a new Novice license were rushed and are not well thought out. Both petitions suggest CW band limits on 80, 40, and 15 meters beginning 50 kHz above the lower band limit, in conflict with their own previous petitions for reframing Novice frequencies. If WT 04-140 is acted upon as requested by the ARRL, Novice and Tech Plus licensees would have their privileges reduced as a result action on RM-10867. Restructuring needs more thought.

3. Need for a New Entry Level License

Having recently taught amateur radio course, I reluctantly come to the conclusion that the Technician license, as an entry level to amateur radio, is complex. It offers too many privileges to a “novice” entering the amateur radio service and tests on too many subjects. The ARRL support of discontinuing the Novice license in restructuring was misplaced. The issue of dropping the license in April 2000 should have looked at adjusting Technician Class privileges.

The amateur service has three classes – Amateur Extra, General, and Technician. The examinations for these licenses have 50, 35, and 35 questions drawn from pools of 804, 383, and 511 questions, respectively². Most amateurs don’t feel thirty-five questions for the entry level license is too many and take exception to the positions of the ARRL and the NCVEC³. But the modes and power privileges granted require too many technologies to be covered for new entrants into the service. It would be reasonable to remove privileges for new entrants, for example, EME, space communications, high power⁴, repeaters, the ability to form clubs, application for vanity calls, spread spectrum, access to Group C calls and SSTV are among those that could be removed. What subjects are adequate, how create a new license class and when to accomplish this, at minimum cost to the Commission, are important questions.

Rather than accept the ARRL or NCVEC plan, the Commission could allow separate NPRMs on the Morse and restructuring issues, allowing the amateur community⁵ more time to provide more guidance on restructuring. Unlike the case of RM-10413 (Novice frequencies refarming), the ARRL has not sought its members input on desirable characteristics of a new entry level license and the need for automatic upgrades. The NCVEC is not a membership organization and reflects only the interests of its related revenue producing training, testing and publication organizations. The ARRL and NCVEC petitions were rushed and inadequately developed and they do not represent ideas that are in the best interests of the amateur service.

Given (1) there must be only three active license classes, (2) a new lower entry license class is required and (3) loss of privileges to Technician licensees is not acceptable, the only conclusion possible is *Technicians must be granted General Class privileges without earning them*. A large segment of the amateur population (mostly those that have earned their current license privileges or philosophically believe that we should retain some form of incentives in the amateur service) object to the unearned upgrading of Advanced and Technician Class licensees. The Commission should also consider this in any restructuring plan.

There are solutions to meeting all of these goals, if a new Novice license can be created and the Technician license allow to continue for a period of time until the General and Technician question pools can be merged. One of many scenarios could be:

² The quality of the questions is not a matter addressed by RM-10867, although many amateurs express concern about the easy of memorizing the answers. RM-10868 from the Radio Amateur Foundation addresses these problems and the Commission should give attention to these concerns.

³ Canada’s Basic license examination has 100 questions drawn from a pool of 967 questions.

⁴ Limiting power to 200 watts on HF, and to safer levels on VHF/UHF would be reasonable. Choosing a lower power limit for HF would make enforcement difficult and would not protect a licensee’s investment. It should not be necessary to buy new equipment when upgrading to General Class (even if equipment manufacturer’s would prefer)..

⁵ There are concerns that comments being submitted for RM-10867 may not fully reflect the amateur community’s opinions. Many comments seem to be identical, and it is not clear the submitter is valid. The number of Technician Class commenters (who would receive General class privileges for no additional work) is out of proportion to their percentage in the amateur community. There is at least one documented case of a comment not in agreement with an amateur’s position having submitted by someone unknown on his behalf.

- a. Develop a new entry level license and use the current Commission Novice Class ULS process to begin accrediting new amateurs. Adequate time should be allowed to develop an entry level test agreeable to the amateur community. Changes to Part §97.301 (f) could allocate new HF phone and CW/data privileges to Novices and Technicians (including those without credit for Morse code). The upgrade path would remain Novice to Tech to General. There would be four “active license classes – Extra, General, Technician, and Novice.
- b. Question pools have been publicized as being valid for three years, so the next time the General Class question pool could be adjusted is July 2007. At that time the General and Technician pools could be merged and the Technician Class license made inactive. There would then be three active licenses – Extra, General, and Novice. Advanced and Technician would continue to be defined in Part §97.301, but no new licenses would be issued thereafter.
- c. Prior to July 2007 the amateur community could address how to reorganize testing and the creation of question pools. There are strong feelings that the current method teaches memorization of answers, not the radio art. SPAR (Society for the Preservation of Amateur Radio), FISTS and RAF (Radio Amateur Foundation) are groups with concerns about testing. They and other interested organization deserve a opportunity to develop ideas on this issue, rather than have it remain with VEC organizations that have only monetary interests in the testing process.

4. Morse Requirements for HF Privileges.

Morse requirements for the General Class license should be removed while retaining it for Extra Class. There is strong support for this compromise among the amateur community. HF RTTY and data (including CW) privileges given to Novices and Technician Plus licensees can be assigned to Technician licensees without Morse Credit. Limited phone privileges can be added to allow all Technician and Novice licensees access to limited HF phone, as suggested by the ARRL and NCVEC (the ARRL allocations are preferred). Immediate action by the Commission would be accepted by the largest segment of the amateur population. Such action could be independent of any other restructuring.

Chart I.
Advanced and Novice Licensees Since April 2000 Restructuring

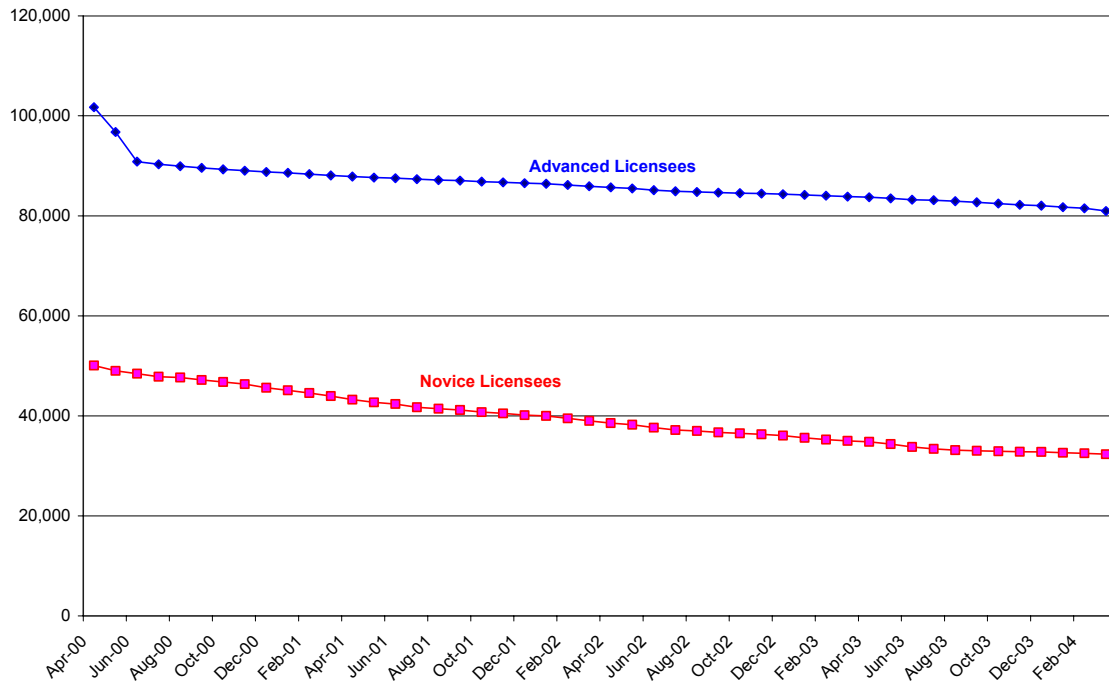


Chart II.

New Amateur Licensees Since August 1999

(Start of FCC ULS Amateur Radio Database)

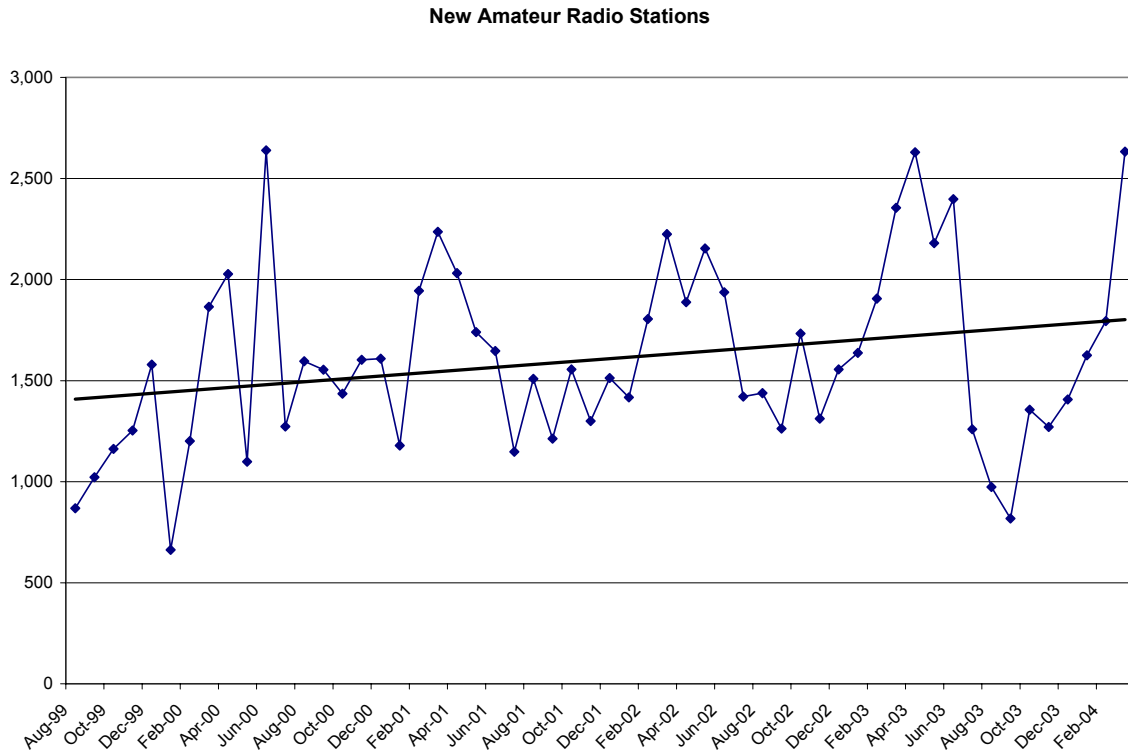


Chart III.
Japanese vs. U.S. Amateur Radio Stations
(By year since 1959)

